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Cross-Cultural Learning and Understanding

OSAYIMWENSE OSA

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Pulke, Maple Syrup, and Palm Wine: International and Multicultural Literatures for Cross-Cultural Learning and Understanding

Osayimwense Osa, Virginia State University, USA

Abstract: Multiculturalism is still a buzzword in the humanities and education. Through exposure to multicultural literatures, students expand their multicultural knowledge and awareness. Having a meaningful experience and understanding of multiple world cultures is to learn how to understand and appreciate the other. Cross-cultural understanding helps one to learn to intelligently accept differences which the world needs for international understanding and world peace. Using a combination of literary and practical pedagogical approaches, and real classroom experiences, the aim of this study is to explore the uniqueness of the individual and common threads that bind people together in multicultural and international literatures for children and youth, and how it can be humanistically and effectively taught in colleges and universities.

Keywords: Literature, Adolescent Literature, Comparative Analysis, Multiculturalism, Diversity, Pluralism, Prejudice, Social Studies, Education, Humanities

Introduction

The central position of literature in the humanities is unquestionable. And it is the good literature and how it is effectively taught that helps to solidify this central position. Almost forty years ago, G. Lynn Nelson stated:

As English teachers, we blithely take a work of literature – another human being's struggle with the world through words—and we casually wipe the blood off it and carefully sift the dust and ashes of our occupational sterility on it and put it in a glass case so that it can be touched; and then we stand back with an antiseptic pointer like a curator in a museum and proceed to point out metaphors and allusions and plot development. And then, after such habitual exercises in (emasculatation of literature, of ourselves, of our students), we inevitably repair to the coffee room to lament with great self-righteousness the apathy of our students. (Nelson 1974, 49)

This should not be the case in an effective course or courses in literature or in the humanities. The teacher's major goal is to guide the selection of books and to help adolescents read literature as human experience--not to teach a fixed number of books, a smattering of bibliographical data, or a miscellaneous collection of historical fact. Such information may support and extend but can never supplant the reader's perception of experiences communicated by the author (Loban, Ryan, and Squire 1961, 436). This is where the artistry and talent of a good teacher or facilitator or professor comes in and really matters. Put a good book into the hands of a skilled and passionate teacher and those ideas come alive in the classroom; no longer is reading simply a laborious and necessary evil to help students pass their science test. Suddenly reading has a purpose (Wolk 2009). As I have indicated elsewhere, in the canon of literature, one meets good novels, mediocrities, and worse, but it is the significant and well-written ones irrespective of cultural milieu that are worth the reading and study time of adolescents, lovers of good reading and those who have developed an enviable lifetime habit of reading.¹ Good literature is one of the few places left in modern life

¹See "Adolescent girls' need for love in two cultures—Nigeria and the United States", and "The representation of cultural mechanisms, manipulations, and processes in children's literature..." where I focused mainly on two well written novels

where the uniqueness of the individual is celebrated while at the same time common threads that bind people together are revealed (Donelson and Nilsen 1980, 403). Using a combination of literary and practical pedagogical approaches, and real classroom experiences, this essay is an exploration of the uniqueness of the individual and common threads that bind people together in multicultural and international literatures for children and youth, and how it can be humanistically and effectively taught in colleges and universities.

In my trip to Mexico City in Mexico a few years ago, I had the opportunity to taste for the first time, pulke (pulque), a popular Mexican local drink. As a result of my curiosity to know more about pulke and how it is produced, I got a good deal of information from a knowledgeable tour guide and an owner of a local store that carries a lot of Mexican artifacts that tourists are presumably interested in buying. They had a good command of both the English language and the Spanish language which drastically reduced that pang of multicultural intelligibility which seems common in such situations.

Pulke is made from Agave plant which is quite common in central Mexico. In fact some were right outside the store which provided indeed, concrete material for the store owner to use in his robust teaching about the pulke and in my memorable learning about it. A hole is bored into the center of this plant to collect the juice through a pipe into a container that for many days naturally comes out of it. It is not really the process that intrigued me but its recalling for me what is obtainable in a very similar manner in other cultures that I have been fortunately exposed to: the production of maple syrup in some parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and in some other parts of New England; and the production of palm wine in various African cultures. Truly, learning to live together in this century is going to require that we turn diversity and complexity into productive resources. And by definition there won't be a single right way to do it (Luke and Elkins 2000, 3). For many adolescents their lives and literacies now, and especially in the future, will be lived out in the interface of the local and global (Harper, Bean, Dunkerly 2010, 1). This necessitates critical, judicious, and humanistic use of representative local, multicultural and international natural and literary resources to teach International and Multicultural Literatures for Cross-Cultural Learning and Understanding.

Pulke, Maple Syrup, and Palm Wine

Pulke, maple syrup, and palm wine which are seen respectively in Mexico, in North American stores, and in African markets are all found in various degrees in other cultures of the world today. Pulke or pulque is a local Mexican alcoholic beverage that is made from the fermented sap of the agave (maguey) plant. Originally produced by the Aztec Indians, pulke is now considered a traditional and indigenous Mexican beverage -- especially in central Mexico -- where it has been produced for ages. Pulke was once considered sacred, and its use was limited to certain classes of Mexicans. But after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, the drink quickly became secular.² The Spanish conquistadors adopted this drink to produce mescal liquor after they ran out of their own imported liquor. Pulke today however is not as popular as it used to be.

Like pulke, palm wine is also an alcoholic beverage made from the sap of the palm tree which grows freely in West Africa and other parts of the tropics. Like pulke and palm wine that are made from the sap of a tree and the sap of a plant, maple syrup is also made from the sap of a tree, maple leaf tree that grows freely in various parts of North America. Maple leaf is part of the Canadian flag. What served as Canada's national anthem for a long time contains maple leaf, "Maple Leaf

from both sides of the Atlantic, *The Bride Price* and *Summer of my German Soldier* as exemplars of excellent literature that demonstrates that youth emotional need for love is arguably universal.

²See "Fermenting Identities: Race and Pulque Politics in Mexico City between 1519 and 1754" (2012) a recent Master's thesis completed by Neil Robert Kasiak at Eastern Kentucky University. Examining pre-conquest and post-conquest perceptions of the maguey (or American agave) and pulque, the maguey's alcoholic by-product, underscores how race, ethnicity and food influenced social change after Cortes marched on Mexico. The socio-political discourse and food cultures that engulfed pulque and the maguey developed under combustible contexts.

Forever.” This anthem was quite popular in British Canada but not in French Canada because of its British flavor and perspective. Understandably, this is why it did not become the official national anthem of Canada.

Images of Pulke, Palm Wine and Maple Syrup



Figure 1a (left): Pulque.

Figure 1b (right): Pack of pulque



Figure 2: Algave plant



Figure 3: Palm wine



Figure 4: Collecting sap from the palm tree to produce palm wine in West Africa.



Figure 5a (left) and 5b (right): Collecting sap from the maple tree to produce maple syrup in North America.

From time immemorial, pulke, palm wine, and maple syrup have been collected in containers (calabashes in West Africa) almost the same way from the inside of each tree or plant through a tube like a siphon, and this traditional or old fashioned way still exists. Undoubtedly, Mexicans, North Americans, and West Africans have demonstrated a commonality: they have made, and still

make good use of natural resources—the agave plant, the palm tree, and the maple tree-- that are freely available to them to provide the world with different delicious drinks: pulke, maple syrup, and palm wine. For ages before Europeans' arrival in North America, native or indigenous North American Indians used maple syrup as a food and as a medicine as well. With their tomahawks and other traditional tools, they made incisions into trees and used birch barks to collect the sap. Today, buckets and other kinds of modern containers are used to collect the sap. Unlike the sap of the palm tree and the sap of the agave plant which are left to ferment as needed to make palm wine and pulke respectively, the sap of the maple tree is collected and boiled down to certain appropriate degrees to obtain pure maple syrup. Other cultures too numerous to mention I believe have also made good use of their local natural resources to enrich human life. Clearly, we are a multicultural, pluralistic society, which suggests that our curricula must be pluralistic because that's who we are, that's the way we live now and will continue to do so in the twenty-first century (Townsend 1997, 14), and adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history (Moore et al 1999, 99). But this reading and writing more is almost meaningless, lackluster, and boring until and unless it impacts adolescents' attitude toward the material or content of their reading and writing.

Adolescent Literature and Literacy, and Multicultural Experiences

For over three decades, I have taught Adolescent Literature and Literacy and other world literature courses from a multicultural and international perspective to undergraduate and graduate students in various large and small colleges and universities—Georgia State University, Clark Atlanta University, Mississippi Valley State University, Pennsylvania State University, and Virginia State University, and in Bayero University and Bendel State University in Nigeria. This discourse deals however mainly with adolescent or youth or young adult literature genre from a multicultural perspective. This multicultural perspective recalls the New Zealander, Sylvia Ashton Warner, who gave us an early model for multicultural teaching. A Trans-cultural was her term for communication between cultures that forms a two-way bridge back and forth, each affecting each, rather than a one way colonial influence of the dominant Pakeha (European) culture on the other Maori culture [Topics: Teaching and Conserving a Black Child] (Thompson 2000, 90). Colonial influence of the dominant group in politics and in pedagogy has always been subtly or overtly resisted by the colonized who has legitimately sought, and still seeks and struggles for recognition. Taken together, these struggles pushed across cultural and social fields in the United States, pressing upon traditional institutional structures, behavioral patterns, values, and social theories and caused all to respond to difference (Shannon 2000, 93). And one way of response to difference is through exposure to multicultural literatures.

When students are expected to communicate meaningfully with one another, the multicultural composition of the classroom plays a transcultural or intercultural role in that students must learn to know one another. Students' cultural orientations are an organic part of the choices they make for their inquiry projects, and their learning is more meaningful when this kind of personal interest is taken as the starting point. When students are personally and meaningfully involved in their learning, teachers, too, feel more meaning (Thompson, 2000, 94-95). Through exposure to selected works of African literature, Kent Ewing (1999) successfully "Africanized" an American classroom in an interdisciplinary World Cultures class at Hong Kong International School, the American school in Hong Kong, a frenzied international city of culture and finance. Inspired by Lawino's "The long-necked and graceful giraffe/Cannot become a monkey" in Ugandan poet, Okot p Bitek's, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, one of his students creatively wrote his/her own comparison:

A palm tree cannot produce
Syrup like a maple tree.
A chicken cannot fly like a robin.
A donkey cannot run like a horse
And a black cannot become a white.

According to Ewing, “it is the power of the literature -- not any teaching strategy, pedagogy or personality--that is making our students more perceptive readers, more expressive writers, and more thoughtful speakers...They can do all this and more because they have entered into the very life of a culture through its literature” (Ewing 1999, 84-85).

A course like Adolescent Literature and Literacy taught from a multicultural and international perspective could be a part of the courses or program that colleges or universities could use to fulfil their ideal of commitment to multiculturalism and diversity. The representation of various cultures and diverse voices in the content and pedagogy of such a course clearly reflects sensitivity to the needs and values of others. Its concern for sociocultural equity makes such course quite appealing. As an exploration of adolescent literacy and curricular design for using the diversity of cultural voices in adolescent literature in high schools or in colleges, the course frame work should consist of a reflective critical inquiry into the meaning of literacy, the meaning of learning, the meaning of knowledge, what sorts of texts should be used in English classrooms, and how teachers can facilitate learning and develop a lifetime reading habit in others. Adolescent Literature and Literacy taught from a multicultural perspective should of necessity have collaborative investigation concentrated on three areas:

1. Literacy: Implications for pedagogy;
2. Literature;
3. Thematic Teaching Units.

Its curriculum should be a hodge podge of adolescent novels, readings in literacy, experiential activities, discussions, oral report/presentations and writing assignments that give students opportunities to demonstrate their growing knowledge of diversity of voices in adolescent literature, and critical perspectives on pedagogy. The course activities should be designed and sequenced to sustain interest and keep boredom at bay. The culminating experience of the course could be an opportunity for students to demonstrate their new knowledge and appreciation of multicultural literary text of their choice or a multicultural theme/issue of their choice through class presentation or teaching -- outlining clear goals and objectives, learning activities, and resources to use in their teaching.

In its multicultural thrust, it would seem that such course is designed primarily for students, especially preservice teachers and service teachers who are presumed to be deficient or lacking in the knowledge of non-western or non-Euro-American literature and deficient or lacking in how to teach it to others. It also seems to reflect subtly or covertly, a desire to transform a monocultural literate into a multicultural literate. Nonetheless, we should not delude or deceive ourselves into the belief that exposure of students to one or two multicultural courses, or a block of three or four multicultural courses will transform them overnight into multiculturalists. But it is a worthwhile beginning, bearing in mind that becoming a multicultural teacher is a development process without a real known point of arrival (Pewewardy 1998, 69).

Based on real classroom experience, to enhance the multicultural thrust of a course or class, it is wise to freely share one's multicultural experiences where and when necessary in the classroom. One's openness about it and students' desire to know can break down barriers in the classroom. Our goal as instructors is to establish interest in the course and sustain it, and ultimately engender a genuine thirst for reading multicultural literatures and teaching them to others. In each of the semesters that I have taught Adolescent Literature and Literacy, I have gladly shared various stories of my own multicultural encounters with my students. One of these stories is about my

refusal to eat hot dog for about three weeks after my arrival at the University of New Brunswick in Canada in 1976 because I thought it was real hot literal meat of man's best friend, the dog. It was only after making some friends and acquaintances there that I honestly, comfortably, and bluntly asked some of them one day, "do you eat dog meat here?" I was surprised to hear them say, "no." And I hastened to tell them that hot dog was often listed in the menu in the dining hall for us to eat. My statement really tickled them. And after rounds of plain and genuine energetic burst of laughter which made me somewhat uneasy, they told/taught me that hot dog is just what that particular long roll of meat is called. Equipped with such knowledge, I comfortably had my first dinner of hot dog later on the same day with satisfaction.

There is quite a lot in terms of multiculturalism in this anecdote shared in the classroom. It whetted the students' appetite for more and it helped to spark interest and zeal in the course which the students envisaged would be an exciting one. That it was a real personal experience makes it a memorable one. I use such story in class to illustrate possible experiences of others (the different or the outsider) when they live in foreign cultures. Food from one culture that is non-existent in another is usually seen as strange by the outsider until he/she eats or partakes of the food. Some cultures enjoy eating fried scorpions and fried termites and frog legs – a fact that many outside such cultures would find very strange. Translated into literature studies and instruction, until a student really sits down to consume/read and appreciate a literary work from another culture, he or she has not experienced the excitement and broadening of his or her horizon that comes with such engagement. A major goal of a multicultural and international course in Adolescent Literature and Literacy includes raising students' awareness of differences and sameness among cultures and different treatments that various ethnic groups could receive in certain circumstances. Such an awareness usually helps students and preservice teachers recognize instantly these treatments in their schools that are increasingly growing multicultural in population, and learn to deal with them appropriately.

Novels for Cross-Cultural Learning, Exploration, and Conversation

Literature offers one of the most significant ways to express new perceptions, and the essays, novels, and memoirs of those writers today who straddle geographic and cultural boundaries can help us understand how people experience linguistic and cultural fragmentation (Isabelle de Coutivron 2000: B4). While encouraging students to read wide in multicultural literature and generate questions for discussion in their oral report/presentation, to keep collaborative inquiry strong in the classroom, it is wise to select good books for common reading and in-depth class discussion. Some representative good ones from five cultures are as follows:

- Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* (and the movie version) (American).
- Eleanora Tate's *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*, (African American culture).
- Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, (African culture).
- Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (Latino or Hispanic America).
- William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (and the movie version) (British).

These five novels are by no means the be all and end all in multicultural reading. Using good judgement, I suppose, professors could select these aforementioned novels (and related movie materials where and when necessary) or other well written ones that they believe are engaging enough to create opportunities for cross-cultural learning, exploration, and conversation. This selection has worked for me and my students in the various classes I have used them. While there was usually general agreement in our discussion of some issues raised in these books, at times there was none. But such disagreement made the class more exciting. I noticed sometimes, that my class students were steadily learning how to listen to others in a true spirit of give and take which is necessary for enhancing camaraderie in the classroom and in the teaching profession, and in the wider human and global community. A discussion in which everyone merely agrees with everyone

else isn't much of a discussion. Depending on thematic concentrations and the like, discussion of each work might not get equal attention or coverage in the class but all attempt is made to avoid such inequality. As we choose books for our students to read together, we need to look for books that probably will cause different reactions from the students primarily because of their different backgrounds and experiences. Students need to be encouraged to explore and appreciate the cultural assumptions in multicultural books for what they are and what they mean to that particular culture that the book/books comes/come from. In the process they slowly and steadily deepen their appreciation of similarities and differences among the vibrant heterogenous or multicultural world strengthening their multicultural awareness.

Considering such a course as Adolescent Literature and Literacy as a durable nexus for preservice teachers, practicing teachers, English majors, and potential librarians to know each other and their respective calling, and collaborate on aesthetic, curricular, instructional, and literacy matters, it is advisable to predicate one's teaching on the assumption that exposure to the course would move students outside their monocultural boundaries to appreciate others. Bearing in mind that there are a countless number of works in multicultural literatures, I always ensure that the discussion of our selected novels and readings in the classroom serve as an impetus or springboard for English majors, English Education majors and Library Science majors to continue to explore multicultural literature texts during and after end of the course.

Unless we embody the spirit and deed of what we are teaching as learners ourselves and as models for our students we won't be making the impact we need to make...If we want our students to be thinking researchers, collaborators, readers, writers, and evaluators, then they need to see us thinking, researching, collaborating, reading, writing, and evaluating. We need literally to live the life we are asking them to lead (Routman 1996). I wholeheartedly agree with Routman. I believe in the teacher as leader and in leadership by example. I generally find the essays which make up Literacy at the Crossroads (1996) very useful in terms of implication for pedagogy. One dictum we garnered especially in the essay, "Leading the Literacy Life we Want Our Students to Lead," which every student read for our class discussion is for teachers to be excited at whatever they do especially when teaching their students, and make the teaching of literature lively and relevant by making connections where necessary to individual or collective lives, social functions, or diversity of cultures.

I wanted my students to think and act multicultural, and the multicultural dimension of our collective reading was central in our discussion of selected novels beginning with Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*. I usually begin with *Summer of My German Soldier* because I assume that its content would be comparatively more familiar to the students than the content of the other books, and follow it with *The Bride Price* because of their thematic similarity—"adolescent girls need for love." I do not approach the course just as a palliative, a peep at what life is like elsewhere or a peep at sociocultural practices of non-western cultures but rather as an integrated one that probes collective human experience and its contribution to diversity. All through the course I encourage students to draw connections where necessary between the literary work and actual events in real life.

Research into the fundamental uniformity or difference in adolescent development in various societies, especially in literature, is rare but worthwhile. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) is set in pre-independence Nigeria and Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* (1973) is set in the United States during World War II. Although probably neither Buchi Emecheta nor Bette Greene knew the other's work, the thematic similarity is obvious. The protagonists of both novels are girls in their early adolescence. Aku-nna, a Nigerian in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, is thirteen at the beginning of the story, and Patty Bergen, a Jew in Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*, is twelve. Starved of affection and love in their different homes, both Aku-nna and Patty long for love and company and from this common desperate longing for love or companionship, the novels get their strengths. Both Aku-nna and Patty desperately want company to satisfy their common

need--selfworth. Their common desperation overrides custom and traditional values, and they courageously battle the prevailing mores of their respective societies.

Like Patty in *Summer of My German Soldier* who falls in love with an “enemy,” a German prisoner of war, Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* is equally starved of affection and she falls deeply in love with an osu (outcast) descendant who according to Ibuza society is not free to mix with freeborns. Anton in *Summer of My German Soldier* and Chike in *The Bride Price* are not looked on favorably in Jenkinsville, Arkansas, and Ibuza, but Patty and Aku-nna find that these “social outcasts” provide the love and care which they need. Both Aku-nna and Patty are developed in considerable depth, and unlike a welter of paper-thin adolescent characters featured in many junior novels, they emerge as rounded characters. Both *The Bride Price* and *Summer of My German Soldier* reveal the mind and character of two teen-age girls—an African or Nigerian and an American—who because of their common desperate need for love and companionship go against age-old custom and practices and experience pain in the process. The successful characterizations of Aku-nna and Patty enhance the unity of *The Bride Price* and *Summer of My German Soldier*. Despite the vast Atlantic which separates Nigeria and the United States, these two sympathetic and touching novels, written with vivacity and deftness, reveal that young adolescent girls in both cultures have a common need for love. Such books introduce and inspire children from a variety of backgrounds to an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of cultures other than theirs. Beside using *Summer of My German Soldier* (the novel and the movie) and *The Bride Price* to explore adolescents’ need for love in two different cultures, I also use them to discuss racism and prejudice and their effects on communities and on individuals.

In *Summer of My German Soldier*, although only one street, Main Street, is the hub of Jenkinsville, Arkansas, the novel’s fictionalized town setting, the town has become cosmopolitan enough to boast of diverse ethnic population of Jews, African Americans, Asians, and, Caucasians, but they are not integrated. There is a white Jenkinsville and there is a black Jenkinsville. This segregation reflects the segregation in Arkansas and other southern states of the US during the 1930s and World War II and into the 1960s. Has segregation disappeared completely even in this new millennium? This novel can be successfully used in a unit on segregation and prejudice. It provides some good proportion of material that is helpful in uncovering and knowing the past to understand the present and possibly speculate about the future. Only the novel’s heroine, the twelve year old Jewish girl, Patty Bergen, in the whole of Jenkinsville attempts to know and establish relationships with African Americans and associate with and get along with Christians in Jenkinsville. Unlike her rigid Jewish parents, Patty Bergen sees no problem in associating with her Christian friends. Only Patty Bergen shelters the innocent and simple escapee young German prisoner of war, Anton Reiker, who gives her the love and companionship that she lacks at her parents’ home. During their brief innocent and secret love relationship after Anton’s escape from the prisoners of war camp, they share their stories with each other, and Patty learns about German history, and realizes that not all Germans supported the Nazis. Similarly, it is only Chike, the osu in *The Bride Price* that demonstrates genuine understanding and affection for Aku-nna in her loneliness in her African polygamous home where her mother and co-wives compete and politic for their husband’s affection.

Although she dies in childbirth after her elopement or escape with Chike, she is satisfied with her brief but pleasant marriage to Chike. She insists even on her deathbed that her brief marriage was a happy one, and the choice of the child’s name, “Joy,” should reflect the happiness of the union. Certainly in this case, one may say that Aku-nna’s shortlived happiness brought more joy than a marriage arranged by tradition. Such marriage would have been determined by material (*The Bride Price*), not human gain. The novel seems to argue that a short and sweet marriage is better than a drawn-out life of misery with the wrong partner. Not only does tradition in this novel not take a step in the right direction, but those who rebel against tradition – the girl, Aku-nna, and Chike and other osus (outcasts) are always seen in the best light. Certainly, it is the young characters in both novels, *The Bride Price* and *Summer of My German Soldier*,

Aku-nna, Chike, and the other osus (outcasts), Patty Bergen, and Anton that are seen positively as caring human beings and not the prejudiced adults. They are the ones who make the human moves, even at the cost of material sacrifice. Frankly, both the African writer, Buchi Emecheta, and the American writer, Bette Greene, say nothing positive about prejudice or racism. *The Bride Price* shows the destructive side of the osu (outcast) tradition and *Summer of My German Soldier* illustrates the insensitivity and dehumanizing effect of racism and prejudice. The killing of Anton Reiker and the “locking up” of Patty Bergen in Arkansas Reformatory for girls for “treason” are not presented in good light.

Anton’s escape from the prisoner of war camp in Jenkinsville in a fictional work, *Summer of My German Soldier*, helps to recall another escape, on a larger scale, on the other side of the Atlantic--the mass escape of Jews from the Nazi extermination camp at Sobibor in Eastern Poland which is a historical fact. It happened on October 14, 1943. The movie, “Escape from Sobibor,” is based on Richard Rashke’s book, *Escape from Sobibor*. There is a reprint edition of it by University of Illinois Press, 1995. Regardless of the difference between Jenkinsville, Arkansas, and Sobibor in terms of the number of escapees—only one simple and innocent German from the pow camp in Jenkinsville, and about three hundred Jews escapees from the extermination camp in Sobibor—it is human nature to want to avoid or escape an intolerable situation by any means necessary.

I usually show the movie version of *Summer of My German Soldier* after our reading and discussion of the novel, and follow it with showing the movie, “Escape from Sobibor,” in class, not really for entertainment but for students to watch and reflect on humanity in its multifaceted complexity. I want them to think deeply about both escapes, the irrational killing of the simple German soldier, Anton, and the persecution of Patty Bergen by Jenkinsville people, and the Nazi guards’ brutal treatment of the Jews as reflected in the movie, “Escape from Sobibor.” “Escape from Sobibor,” is a 1987 British made-for-TV film which aired on CBS and it successfully reflects the indomitable courage and the spirit of humanity at its most desperate to escape untold cruelty and brutality. My intention in using these graphic movies in our discussion of *Summer of My German Soldier* is to stimulate deep reflection reminiscent of that of Jeffrey Glanz after his visit to the infamous Sobibor camp and other Nazi concentration camp sites: How could the greatest and most technologically advanced civilization in the world at the time, a civilization that produced such great scientists, artists, musicians, and authors, have committed such atrocities... The ultimate purpose of education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but rather the development of character. Its purpose is to encourage people to become caring, ethical, and sensitive. That is indeed the highest ideal of schooling and education (Glanz 2000, 527).

Unlike Patty who tries to relate with others--African Americans, people of different religious faith, and a young German prisoner of war -- other Jenkinsville people cocoon themselves in their respective comfort zones. Even the town’s elite citizens who should know better, recklessly and hatefully destroy the store of the Asian, Mr. Lee, popularly called the Chink, and violently chase him out of Jenkinsville simply because of his Japanese or Japanese related identity or ancestry. And one of the elite citizens cheerfully tells Bergen the Jewish business man, “Our boys at Pearl Harbor would have got a lot of laughs at the farewell we gave the Chink” (*Summer*, p.18). In my teaching I strive to connect this irrational act during WW II with a senseless and violent one in the 90s -- over fifty years later in America. Like these Jenkinsville elite citizens, the two African American young men who dragged out an innocent driver from his truck and almost stoned him to death simply because he was the other, white, during the Rodney King riot in Los Angeles in 1992, were just having fun and “a lot of laughs.” That was quite obvious as seen nationwide or worldwide on the television. These actions by some elite citizens in Jenkinsville during WW II in the 40s in *Summer of My German Soldier*, and by some young African Americans in real life in the 90s are clearly inappropriate, irrational, senseless, and downright inhuman. Were it not for the timely help that the truck driver got from another African American, he would probably not have survived the attack. Evidently, regardless of one’s ethnic identity, it does seem that at an unguarded moment

people can degenerate into unfeeling beings who rejoice at inflicting pain on others like what the young English boys do in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* after degenerating into savages.

When the Memphis Bureau of United Press sends the story of Patty Bergen's brief love affair with Anton as "How a Jewish girl befriended a German boy" over the international wires, the story instantly becomes a global news item. Patty Bergen's grandmother's reaction to this global news item is significant food for thought in multicultural discourse which I draw attention to for in-depth discussion in class. She sincerely prays that when people read about Patty they'll feel a little closer to their brothers no matter what faith or nationality (*Summer*, p.169). I stress this grandmother's reflection as the essence of multiculturalism -- learning to appreciate others for what they are without losing or destroying our own identity or unnecessarily attempting to destroy or villify theirs. Critical viewing or watching of the movie version enhances this point and our general knowledge of the novel. Besides, the movie provides some strand of media literacy for class discussion.

Like *Summer of My German Soldier*, Eleanora Tate's *The Secret of Gumbo Grove* proves useful as a tool for teaching some aspects of the negative side of racism. Using *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*, a teacher or professor can deal with a lack of representation of some ethnic groups in the school curriculum and its possible implication for literacy, and the positive result of diverse groups of people working together. The heroine of the novel, twelve year old Raisin Stackhouse, whose interest in history is paramount in her life is uneasy at not seeing African American figures studied at all in her history or social studies class in her school in South Carolina. When Raisin asks why no African American was studied when it came to their own Calvary County community in her history class, her teacher tells her offhandedly, "nobody Black around here had ever done anything good worth talking about" (*Secret of Gumbo Grove*, p. 5). Beside her school history teacher, her parents or home and community do not stimulate her budding interest in history--particularly that of her local community, Gumbo Grove. When she asks her father about the identity of those buried in their community church cemetery, he tells her without reflection, "Dead people." His virtual dismissive "monosyllabic" reply snuffs out her curiosity to ask more questions about local history.

Evidently, language rich home and school environment which usually play major role in the development of students' content knowledge of a discipline or language and literacy skills are near non-existent for Raisin Stackhouse. Our concern for students' literacy development cannot afford to ignore their home backgrounds. Without access to what she really wants to read and study coupled with absence of real mentors to guide her, Raisin's literacy growth does not promise to blossom. Raisin virtually dies a death of the spirit until she meets the eighty year old widow church secretary, Effie Pfluggins, who initiates her into African American oracy and stimulates her into reading and research. Besides telling her numerous tales and histories of Gumbo Grove African American community in Calvary County in *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*, the old widow encourages her to read, write, and do research. She gives her rare print material--the community church records--to read and study. In fact Effie Pfluggins becomes the storyteller as teacher and mentor, and Raisin Stackhouse the listener and recorder of Effie's tales, becomes the student and mentee.

This teacher-student context recalls a similar situation in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* where Aunt Lupe in one of the vignettes and short stories which make up this novel, tells Esperanza that writing will keep her (you) free (*Mango Street*, p. 61). The context also recalls another similar one in Cyprian Ekwensi's *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*. In this African novella the grand old storyteller, Mallam Ilia, tells the story of his life and the history of his indigenous Hausa community before and after its colonization by the British, to an African youngster, Hassan, who put them in writing for posterity. Clearly, these aforementioned multicultural works from African America, Latin America, and Africa demonstrate that in the age old tradition, the old teach the young (Abrahamson 1976).

Using Effie Pfluggins's numerous tales of Gumbo Grove's illustrious sons and daughters, Raisin Stackhouse hones her research of the mysterious founder of Gumbo Grove. She contacts the community librarian who helps to locate materials about Alexander Gumbo Dickson for her to use in her study and research. Solving the mystery requires the joint efforts of the young, the old, the church, the Calvary County Negro Business and Professional Women, the library, and the media (Johnson, 1991). The ultimate discovery is that Alexander Gumbo Dickson, the founder of Gumbo Grove, was indeed a black man. However, Gumbo Dickson's ethnic identity is not really the issue but Raisin's avid reading and research which resulted in a reawakening of solidarity between the blacks and the whites in the county. Raisin declares at the end of the novel, "I didn't have to feel bad about not knowing our history because I knew it at last" (*Gumbo Grove*, p. 199). Delighted at Raisin's research and discovery of the African American ethnic root of Gumbo Dickson, Wim Smithers the white president of the Calvary County Historical Society promises to support all future endeavors of the African American community.

Like Aku-nna and Patty Bergen, Raisin Stackhouse experiences a lack of parental support in her thirst for love and knowledge, and they get it outside their homes. Patty is touched by Anton Reiker's stories, and Raisin is touched by Effie Pfluggins's stories and by the church records. Aku-nna easily notices her mother's swift involvement in the politics of her new husband's polygamous home and learns to stand on her feet. While Raisin rejoices with her community at the uncovering of the ethnic identity of the founder of their town at the end of *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*, Patty is put in Arkansas Reformatory for girls for her "treason" in sheltering a German prisoner of war at the end of *Summer of My German Soldier*. Even at the reformatory, Patty continues to experience hostility from the people there because she secretly sheltered "an enemy." These three young girls from different cultures provide some glimpse into young girls' common crave for love and knowledge. Unlike these three novels about young girls, *Lord of the Flies* deals exclusively with young boys.

Our discussion of *Lord of the Flies* concentrated on the print version and the movie version especially the American one and their similarities and differences. Showing the movie of *Lord of the Flies* provided us with an opportunity to explore visual literacy, the ability to actively and perceptively watch and critically analyse and interpret images on the screen. In the course of examining the cultural content of the film we noticed differences between the product of one mind, the novel, and the product of several minds, the film/movie -- producer, actors, photographers, and editors. Unlike the British naval officer who waits for the young savages to get themselves together and ride back with him to England in a navy cruiser at the end of the novel, it is an American marine joined by other marines in helicopters that come to the island to take home the young savages in the movie/film version or adaptation of the novel. But Americanization or use of marine in the film version or film adaptation of the print novel does not destroy the essential meaning of the novel as the students generally agreed. Evidently, the students' critical viewing skills developed beyond the level they had before their exposure to the course. The young boys' graphic sudden stop in their mad and frenzied pursuit to kill Ralph when they see the authority figures (a British navy officer in the novel but an American marine in the movie version) toward the end of the novel indicates that they are not beyond redemption after all and that they still respect adult/authority which their long absence on the island had almost wiped out of their memory.

Since its publication in 1954, *Lord of the Flies* has been used successfully in various classrooms in America and classrooms in other parts of the world because of its universal theme of tracing the defects of society back to the defects in human nature. Teaching *Lord of the Flies* continues to be an enjoyable and worthwhile experience not really different from the excitement of yesteryears as contained in Richard H. Lederer's observation: Teaching *Lord of the Flies* showed me that the students clearly felt the intense relationship of the book's story to modern life--the omnipresent reminders of global warfare, the interplay of group antagonisms, and the breakdowns of diplomatic relations. As adolescents, they were interested in, though they did not always agree with Golding's contention that authority, discipline, and rules are necessary in a well-functioning

society (Lederer 1964, 575). Is “the omnipresent reminders of global warfare, the interplay of group antagonisms, and the breakdowns of diplomatic relations” still not in the world today?

Is there any real well-functioning society or utopian culture in the world today? Numerous wars have been fought since the publication of *Lord of the Flies* in 1954, and some are still being fought, and there is no guarantee that the future world will be free of war, conflict, or crisis. People make up the society, and the quality of that society reflects the moral nature of its people. Teaching *Lord of the Flies* demonstrates that until people of all cultures of the world keep under control the basic human elements that cause wars and conflicts--possession, power, and fame, to name a few--we won't have a utopia. Here lies the richness of *Lord of the Flies*.

Impact of Reading and Discussion of Multicultural Novels on Students

In the course of our reading and discussion of multicultural texts, I noticed my students' progressive demonstration of an understanding and appreciation of the values of other cultures. Having a deep experience of at least two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute...In the best of circumstances, experiencing two or more cultures offers a way to counter dogmatic nationalism (Isabelle de Courtivron 2000, B4). In their reaction to my anecdote above, my refusal to eat hot dog for some weeks after I arrived in Canada, some of the students genuinely wondered for the first time about the why of the name, “hot dog”, but without arriving at any rationale, answer, or conclusion. For these students, the origin of the name, “hot dog” became a topic of research. In fact these students' reaction implied that they had taken the name, hot dog, for granted until an “outsider” or the “other” drew their attention to it.

I was impressed to see incorporated in some students' units the significance of names that reflect aspects of some cultural values, particularly the meaning of Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, and the meaning of Aku-nna in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, an African novel selected and read by most of the students. *The House on Mango Street* is the interesting story of a young Latina or Hispanic girl, Esperanza Cordero, growing up in Chicago. It is narrated in a series of vignettes and short stories about what she hopes to become. Esperanza the narrator in *The House on Mango Street* says that “in English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine.” Her name as well as her numerous movements with her parents and relations from one place to the other until settling in *The House on Mango Street* seems to suggest her culture's hardship, struggle, and their hope for a better day in America. The ancestors of many Chicanos did not come to the United States by choice, but simply found themselves in the United States as a result of the country's expansionist policy into territory that had once been Mexican. *The House on Mango Street* is a work that captures the universal pangs of otherness--what Cisneros has called “the shame of being poor, of being female, of being not-quite-good-enough” (Trachtenberg 1994). The name, Aku-nna, means father's wealth in *The Bride Price*, and it suggests the high price that many Igbo parents in Nigeria expect to get as dowry when their daughters are ready for marriage. It is this commercialization of the dowry that Emecheta subtly condemns in *The Bride Price*.

Class discussion of our selected texts elicited varied and diverse interesting responses from students and they figured in the units that they opted to teach in class. Some of their reflective voices are worth including here:

One of them wrote about Patty in *Summer*, “I respect her (Patty's) ability to be an individual, to believe what she feels is right regardless of the opinion of society. She does not conform to the generic, acceptable opinion. The novel gives realistic representation of the ignorance that plagues society. The three figures, Patty, Ruth, and Anton, are following what they believe in their hearts. This does not bring them any success, but they stay true to themselves.” And another student indicated, “...as a writer, Bette Greene makes students think and challenge society. She bravely accepts all people and puts minorities in her work. She also makes them the noblest characters. The problem however is that *Summer* is a simplistic novel of prejudice. I thought it started /ignited

my thinking process, but it is not an excellent novel.” These students’ observations and opinions fueled the vitality of the multicultural content and discussion of their units.

To extend our multicultural reading I assigned an African youth novel, *Too Cold for Comfort* by Jide Oguntoye (1980) to a student to read and share in class. This student and some others disagreed with me saying that the novel is not an adolescent or young adult novel because the young adults in the novel are newly married. I welcome such disagreement. To dismiss or ignore such disagreement outright in class risks stifling students’ independent thought and reaction to a novel based on their presumably thorough reading. By considering their views I subtly taught the students that I had regard for their views and perspectives, and I expected the students to see the worth and value in their own thought and argument. Obviously, my students brought to bear on this text their cultural experiences as Americans, while I brought to bear on it during my teaching, my personal or firsthand experience as one born and bred in the culture *Too Cold for Comfort* emanates from -- a culture where successful marriage is still cherished and divorce is almost taboo. Romantic love, the most ubiquitous theme of the western novel, is not a major topic in African fiction. The African novel, for various historical and aesthetic reasons, is far more public, far more socially and politically oriented than its European counterpart (Frank 1982, 484). Kolade and Hannah’s love and troubled marriage in *Too Cold for Comfort* is used to teach the hard lesson-- to demonstrate to young Africans that compromise is at the root of successful marriage which is still cherished in various cultures of Africa (Osa 1995/96).

It is gratifying to note that at the end of this course in Adolescent Literature and Literacy taught from a multicultural perspective, a number of students satisfactorily put interesting multicultural elements in their presentations and unit plans for teaching, and were able to make appropriate connections between cultures. Students’ unit plans at the end of the semester demonstrated a modicum of diversity awareness. For example, some of them successfully paired *Summer of My German Soldier* and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* in their unit on adolescent girls’ need for love as a universal and human emotion, and also in their unit on prejudice. They saw a connection between Patty’s falling in love with the young German prisoner of war, Anton, and the teenaged Aku-nna’s falling in love with an African social outcast, osu, in *The Bride Price*. Reinforcing their unit with my essays, “Adolescent Girls’ Need for Love in Two Cultures: Nigeria and the United States” (1983) and “The representation of cultural mechanisms, manipulations, and processes in children’s literature: *The Bride Price* and *Summer of My German Soldier*” (1995), some students especially the preservice student teachers successfully got across in their teaching unit and in their practical classroom teaching, the shortcomings and deficiencies of traditions and prejudice, and the crisis, heartache, and bloodshed that they sometimes unleash on diverse and varied societies.

Most of the students brilliantly identified parallels between the escape of Anton from the prisoner of war camp in *Summer of My German Soldier* (in the novel, and in the movie version that we watched in class) and in the movie, “Escape from Sobibor.” The electronic -- movie version of *Summer of My German Soldier* successfully reflects the anti-Nazi feeling in America, and the movie, “Escape from Sobibor,” graphically mirrors holocaust atrocities in a Nazi concentration camp during WW II. Common to the movies, “Escape from Sobibor” and “*Summer of My German Soldier*,” is the mode of transportation of human beings: the Jewish prisoners in Europe in the movie, “Escape from Sobibor” and the German prisoners of war in America in the movie of *Summer* were transported enmasse like cargoes in trains to camps where they suffered untold indignity and humiliation. The following are some students’ reflections based primarily on what they read and watched:

“I was very saddened by watching these videos, *Summer* and “Escape from Sobibor,” and seeing how people were persecuted....After the bombing of Pearl harbor, all Japanese living in the United States were under suspicion and sent away to these camps under harsh conditions. These were racial sentiments toward the Japanese during this time and they

were treated very unfairly. It is interesting to me that I had not learned about the way the Americans sent people to these awful camps until now.”

“This ‘Sobibor’ is a good movie to introduce to students before doing a unit on the Holocaust or a book like *The Diary of Anne Frank*.”

“Escape in *Escape from Sobibor* is very different from escape in *Summer*. In ‘Sobibor’, the escape was for 600 versus one young man in *Summer*.”

The foregoing observations and reflections of students arguably serve as multiple points of reference for gauging the growth and development of their knowledge and sensitivity to diversity and other cultures. Certainly, exposure of my English majors, preservice teachers, and Library Science students to this course provided them with diverse windows on human experience.

Conclusion

If our schools’ demographic profile continues to be diverse then we need to teach diverse or multicultural literatures to this student population. Multicultural perspective certainly enriches teaching of Adolescent literature and literacy, and I believe that it will enrich the teaching of any other genre of literature, or any area of the humanities. I make no claim however that teaching a course or courses in adolescent literature or traditional and contemporary literatures and literacy for adults from an international and multicultural perspective can completely and instantly transform students or people into multiculturalists and humanists. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm in multicultural and international literature courses and students’ expanded consciousness and awareness of other people’s cultures through literature is a good development and enhancement of their growing crosscultural awareness, learning, and understanding as growing and developing true humanists.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Osayimwense Osa: Professor, Department of English, Virginia State University, Virginia, USA.

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